



200703921

Independence, individualism & connection among share householders

How do young people who are financially dependent on their parents but living in share households conceive of the concept of independence? The meanings of independence are discussed in relation to a qualitative study of young people who described themselves as independent although they accepted money on a regular basis from their parents. Their descriptions of independence drew heavily on individualism through an emphasis on individual choice and responsibility. However, this individualism was underpinned by the importance of negotiating familial relationships. The findings suggest that young people's claims to choice and independence need to be interpreted in the context of ongoing connections with others.

by

Kristin Natalier

In young people's lives, a linear progression from dependence to independence is no longer the norm (Furlong & Cartmel 1997). Instead, "dependency and independence interact in new and varied combinations" (Thomson et al. 2004, p.218). This is particularly true in the context of share housing, where young people may be living away from their parents but at least partially financially reliant upon them. In this situation, share households become sites of "ambiguous dependency" (Ahier & Moore 1999) where the traditional markers of financial, residential and emotional separation from family of origin (Coles 1995) are disjointed and sometimes transient. They highlight how young people's definitions of independence are contextual and grounded in the relationships arising through the organisation of householding activities between and within households.

The impetus for this study comes from shared households' increasing significance as a housing option for young people. In Australia, where this study was conducted, 38.8% of 20- to 24-year-olds in independent households are living with peers, approximately the same proportion as are living with a partner (Burke, Pinkey & Ewing 2002, p.12). Yet with a few exceptions, sociologists have largely ignored shared households (c.f. Heath & Kenyon 2001a, 2001b; Natalier 2003, 2004). In so doing, they have failed to engage with an empirically widespread and conceptually rich component of contemporary social life. This failure has led to a gap in our understanding of young people's

lived experiences and interpretative processes in their housing contexts – a central element of their day-to-day lives and an important component of identity (Heath & Kenyon 2001a).

Beyond the context of share households, the importance of independence and autonomy, and young people's right to attain them, has become a significant preoccupation of youth studies. The terms have been central to definitions of adulthood, traditionally seen as the end point in a movement away from childhood via leaving home, getting a job and starting a family. However, changing social, economic and demographic landscapes mean that the relevance of once common markers can no longer be taken for granted (Mitchell & Evans 2003). It is now well accepted that young people do not proceed step by step into adulthood and independence. As Ahier and Moore (1999) note, adulthood is not a final destination – its indicators are variable. Any "arrival" is not permanent, as people slip between statuses, structural locations and relationships (Westburg 2004).

A series of studies suggest that young people themselves are adopting changing definitions of adulthood. For example, Arnett (1997) reports that many of the traditional markers of adulthood present only part of the picture. Financial independence and living away from parents and home were considered to be important indicators, but other commonly expressed measures were intangible, individual characteristics; for example, accepting responsibility for actions, deciding on personal beliefs and developing an adult relationship with one's parents. Greene and Wheatley (1992) suggest a similar outcome, where responsible behaviours, autonomous decision-making and financial independence were nominated as the most significant markers of adulthood. Similarly, a study by Jones (1995, p.58) identified the related positions of emancipation from parental control and "standing on your own two feet, economically" as the key markers of independence. The studies suggest that judgments young people make for themselves, and not simply statuses conferred upon them, are important in understanding experiences of independence.

Defining independence with reference to the kinds of values listed above does more

than clarify the concept – it locates it within individualisation and individualism (Lahelma & Gordon 2003) and suggests young people's decisions and interpretations are referenced to their identity as individuals responsible for forging their own path in life. However, social researchers are now calling for a more careful consideration of the roles of social relationships in people's choices and pathways. Most explicitly, Ahier and Moore (1999) suggest the ambiguous dependency faced by young people can only be understood through a focus on negotiations and relationships that tie people together in complex ways (for other examples, see Jones 2004 and Mason 2004). In response to these approaches, the present paper argues that young people in share households do define independence in terms reminiscent of individualism. However, these subjective definitions are facilitated through ongoing social and familial connections and the dependence encapsulated within them.

The study

The data for this discussion were collected through in-depth interviews with 24 people (nine men and 15 women). These individuals were chosen because they were partially reliant on parental income; that is, their parents gave them some money each week or fortnight to contribute to their living costs. For three of the women and one man, parental transfers were the sole source of their income; the other 17 worked, most commonly as casual staff in sales or the hospitality industry, and/or collected government benefits in addition to the money given to them by their parents. Most of the young people were undertaking tertiary education, one woman had finished training as a teacher and was waiting for a placement. The participants were aged between 18 and 23, with a mean age of a little over 20 years. One woman was born in Korea and everyone else was Australian-born. One woman identified as a lesbian; the rest of the sample defined themselves as heterosexual.

Analysis of the data took into account both manifest and latent issues surrounding the concept of independence in the context of shared housing. On the one hand, the following

discussion takes into account the explicit stories, motivations and attitudes expressed by young people. However, analysis moved beyond a simple description of what people said to identify the sometimes unstated and not immediately obvious threads of people's accounts. The excavation of these less obvious dimensions of experience occurred through a contextualised and sensitive interpretation of participants' comments. This analysis allows for a multidimensional approach to the topic, one that reports on young people's experiences while also pointing to their implications for a sociological understanding of the issues explored in the paper. Throughout the process, analysis was recursive, moving between the literature, data and prior ideas and concepts. Thus, the definitions presented in this paper arise out of the data and reflect the worldview of the participants, but they are also informed by the existing literature on adulthood and independence.

The discussion and conclusions must be read in light of the relatively small and homogenous sample. Talking with a larger number of young people and including a broader range of demographic and social characteristics may give rise to a wider variety of definitions of independence. The young people included in this paper were relatively well educated and their prospects suggest that their tight financial circumstances would change as they completed their education and moved into more stable employment. Also, the homogenous ethnic background means we are not able to track the ways in which family ties, and the associated definitions of independence, are shaped among different ethnicities and cultures. Finally, the young people discussed independence and autonomy as it relates to housing and so the paper does not claim to include the meanings attaching to independence as they might arise in other contexts. It provides a particular and contextualised account of the ways in which young people may interpret their housing situations against the grain of "common sense".

Residential independence

The participants in this study emphasised the importance of residential independence:

Moving somewhere means it's your house. Like, you share it but it's not your mum's and that means you're not dependent anymore on her anymore. I think when you choose to go you are saying you are an adult (Katerina).

The importance of residential independence extends beyond relationships with family to the participants' positioning in institutional structures:

I think also it has implications for what the government will give you, and rights, like rights to rent assistance and things. You're independent for the purposes of the government, or at least, it's easier to show this than if you're still at home (Allen).

On one level, a change in households indicates a change to one's identity as an independent person.

The relationship between physically moving away and independence is not quite as straightforward as it first appears. Many of the young people interviewed return to their parents when their current share households dissolve, movements reflective of their status as the "boomerang generation" (Wyn & White 1997). In these times, the people in this study once again find themselves relying on their mothers and fathers for food and shelter (and often increased amounts of money). Thus, it might be argued that the residential independence gained through share household living is transitory. However, young people introduce a symbolic dimension that allows them to continue to define themselves as independent of their parents. Nathan says:

I move back home every summer holidays. I get a job down the coast and go and live with mum and dad.

Interviewer: So how does it feel, being more dependent on them, again?

Nathan: I don't think that I am. I'm staying there but I think I think they realise I'm pretty much my own person now, because I'm used to living on my own. I wouldn't say I'm part of their household anymore. It's more like a visit; it's not my home.

Lenny also emphasises the disconnection between physical proximity and dependence:

The relationship between physically moving away and independence is not quite as straightforward as it first appears.

I've done it, I'm
not their kid
anymore. I make
my own choices,
and just being in
the same house
as them can't
change it.

Moving back, it's clear that things have changed and my relationships with everybody makes this clear, and this is a good thing. I'm staying with them, but I don't live with them. And this is clear because I've got my own life, I manage by myself and I make my decisions. I think once you have that independence your family has to respect that. I mean, there are sometimes hiccups and you have to say 'No, you can't say that to me any more', but once you've got that independence it can't be taken away. You can't rewrite history. I mean, I've done it, I'm not their kid anymore. I make my own choices, and just being in the same house as them can't change it. Not that they want it to and I don't want it to, but you're aware that that's what's happened.

These comments suggest that independence is understood in symbolic terms. In academic literature, moving back and forward between parents' and own residence has been described as a partial or unstable transition, but for the young people in this study place of residence can be an indicator of independence but not a fundamental element of it. Making the initial break from one's parents is a key indicator of autonomy irrespective of how often someone returns and on what basis. In this way, independence transcends the temporal and physical prerequisites that are placed upon it by objective measures.

This approach to residential independence highlights the relevance of both individualism and ongoing relationships. On the one hand, the comments included here indicate the participants do ascribe to some of the tenets of individualism ("I make my own choices"; "I'm pretty much my own person"). Family connections are described in ways that emphasise parents' recognition of their children's autonomy, choice and responsibility. This emphasis on the symbolic dimensions of housing independence – what it means, rather than where it happens – allows young people to talk as though partial dependence does not impact upon their independence *per se*. But this is not to argue that relationships are no longer significant; they remain an important material resource in young share householders' lives.

Financial dependence, independence & responsibility

For the people in this study, group living is enabled through a continued financial reliance upon parents. This seemingly contradictory situation can be reconciled because independence incorporates more than a physical or financial break from a family of origin. For example, May says:

I was living at home with my parents, but I wanted to move because I felt that I was too old to be living at home and not being financially independent ... I wanted to feel like I can pay my own rent, you know, and also I like my own space. I get along very well with my parents, there's no problem in that department but I feel that, at 22, you shouldn't still be bludging off your parents. I don't know, I felt that it was time for me to be independent.

May did not rely on her parents for money when she resided at home but her comments suggest that independence is not understood as simply an absence of financial transfers from parents to children. Since moving out May has continued with her part-time job but her income is now supplemented by an extra \$50 each week, paid into her account by her parents. When asked about this she said:

I guess in some ways I'm not as independent if you mean financially. But with rent and food and stuff at home I rely on Mum and Dad less than I did in kind, you know? But also I think that money is only part of it because I am actually running my house now. There's less of a safety net with Mum and Dad. I am more an adult, paying bills and cooking each night, than I was. I think this means more than actual money.

Even those who do not efficiently fulfil their obligations as householders may define themselves as independent. For example, Leah lives in one of the many households where the bills are perpetually paid late and there is often a last-minute scramble to get to the automatic teller machine to withdraw the rent money. Yet she says:

I like that it's me making sure the things get paid. In terms of, it's the others as well, obviously, and I don't chase them up, it's always

"Oh my god, where's the rent money?" all of us at once, but I have to look after my rent and telephone. It's not the parentals'. And I felt that one reason I left was I didn't want to, I thought it was good to try that stuff on my own.

Such comments suggest that independence is linked to who chooses how the money will be used, rather than simply considering who earns it. The respondents in this study define their situation with reference to their involvement in householding processes and the accountability that attaches to this. As in the discussions on residential independence, the emphasis on their own actions and the ways in which they fulfil their responsibilities echoes the tenets of individualism. This emphasis also indicates that independence and responsibility are experiential (and often symbolic) as well as an objective state of being (see also Harris 1988, p.510). There is a theme of separation and individual responsibility and a downplaying of what are necessary financial links. Yet at the same time, a close and counter-intuitive reading of the data highlights the ongoing symbolic and material importance of relations with parents, even if the young people themselves do not acknowledge their relevance. Materially, parental income in part pays for the householding practices that inform young people's claims of independence. Symbolically, the change in parent-child relationships, the movement from young people's reliance on parental responsibility to individual choice, becomes incorporated into young people's definitions of independence, as much as the actions of the individual.

Independence as lifestyle freedom

Lifestyle is the final dimension of independence described by the young people in the study. The constraints young people may feel living under the eyes of their parents disappear when sharing a home with their peers. For example, Zach says: *There were tensions before I moved out, like, arguments. Not yelling but sort of comments all the time. I was living a really different life to how Mum and Dad thought I should live, not studying enough and partying. In the end it was a mutual, "I should go" so that it didn't get worse. And that's worked out.*

People in this study value the liberty to go out when they wish or invite people into their homes without having to negotiate with their parents. For example, James enjoys, among other things, the parent-free opportunities for his attempts at seduction:

And this is a bit sleazy or something but you know, it's good to avoid mixing the parents and girls. It wasn't really discussed but it wouldn't be welcome, bringing home random girls when Mum and Dad are in the house. You sort of have to keep that separate. The next morning – it's not something I really want to think about.

The above comment reflects the valuing of personal freedom and the importance of developing a lifestyle that is not referenced to others' expectations or demands. Separate residence has been a concern for academics and youth workers because it is a marker of citizenship and a basis for claiming it, and because it affects and is affected by educational and employment transitions – it highlights the impact of structure on young people's opportunities. But for these participants it also holds expressive significance: living away from the family of origin allows them to behave in ways that are inappropriate or awkward within the parental home. Parties and casual sex are often held up as examples of youth irresponsibility, but for those who engage in them, they are invested with an alternative or at least, additional, meaning: they are part of the lived and valued experience of autonomy. In this way, they echo the expectations that the needs and interests of the individual are increasingly a pre-eminent organising force in the choices that make up our biographies.

However, the critiques of an over-emphasised individualism again suggest the need to look more closely for latent patterns. It can be argued that the freedom to live a particular lifestyle actually highlights the ongoing importance of relationships. For the people in this study, moving out of home is seen as a way of minimising tensions over lifestyles and retaining or rebuilding familial goodwill; it is a way of negotiating family relationships. While presented as choices made by individuals, and very much directed toward individual

In the current context, the young people's financial dependence on their parents does not cancel out their claims to independence.

desires, the decision to move out was linked to the emotional element of ongoing connections. It is in the realm of lifestyle independence that the importance of ongoing connections was most explicitly expressed by the young people in the study.

Conclusions

This study looked at how young people interpret independence – a key concept in the sociology of youth – in their day-to-day lives. In so doing, it aimed to trace some of the connections and tensions between dependence and independence as they exist in the context of shared housing. The data show that share householding, rather than being a second-best option, is valued because it allows young people to construct a lifestyle and identity that are symbolically separate from their parents, even when young people are supported by their family.

The findings reinforce the pertinence of Thomson et al.'s (2004, p.218) comment, quoted earlier: "Dependency and independence interact in new and varied combinations". In the current context, the young people's financial dependence on their parents does not cancel out their claims to independence. It enables them by providing the opportunity to pursue dimensions other than simple financial self-sufficiency or physical separation. The participants in this study have defined their status in symbolic as well as practical terms. First and most obviously, people claim they are independent when they live away from home. This is only partly based on ongoing physical separation; the initial break from the parental home allows "boomeranging" young people to maintain their claims to autonomy. Second, independence is defined in terms of taking responsibility for one's financial situation through money management – and mismanagement – rather than simply earning money through wages. Finally, choosing a particular lifestyle without continual justification allows people to be independent even when they return to the parental home. In this way, financial necessity, often ad hoc and in lay terms irresponsible householding practices, and seemingly frivolous social activities take on a new and symbolic significance.

The dimensions of independence have different implications for how young people live their lives, even if they are used in symbolically similar ways. Critique and discussion of policy tends to focus on the material aspects of independence: finances and their role as a resource for residential independence. These are important because they directly impact upon young people's life chances. But this kind of independence may come and go; Ahier and Moore (1999) describe this as "ambiguous dependency" and Thomson et al. (2004) have noted independence and dependency intersect; they do not cancel each other out. The more expressive dimensions of independence may not contribute to the payment of rent but they do allow young people to hold on to a sense of self as able to survive without recourse to their parents' resources. This is an important and empowering component of a definition of independence, particularly in light of structural barriers to the stability of young people's financial independence.

Revisiting definitions of independence is important for several reasons. First, acknowledging different interpretations and incorporating young people's interpretations adds nuance to the findings of quantitative studies (for example, Greene & Wheatley 1992; Jones 1995) which measure key dimensions of the concept but are less able to identify its contextualised character and respond to the emergence of new dimensions. This in turn may inform our reading and critique of youth policy (particular income support), which is often underpinned by conceptualisations of independence (Hartley 1992). Hartley and Woolcott (1994, p.15), in a discussion of familial responsibility and relations of independence, suggest the creation of a set of guidelines to assess the impact of policy on pathways to adulthood. Even if not formally implemented at the policy level, knowing how young people view and value independence may sensitise us to their responses to what many researchers see as disempowering regulations, particularly in the realm of financial stability and independence. Widening our definitions of appropriate and useful sources of these definitions may ultimately contribute to more effective policy critique and development.

As noted earlier, there are limits to the generalisability of the study. The size and homogeneity of the sample mean no claims are made for how these experiences are distributed among the relevant population in Australia. The issues raised in this paper could usefully be investigated beyond Australia. On the one hand, the destabilisation of the socioeconomic bases of transitions into independent housing is a shared feature of Western societies (see Furlong & Cartmel 1997), and shared households are increasingly common in the housing histories of young people in England (Heath & Kenyon 2001b) and the USA (Goldscheider, Thornton & Young-DeMarco 1993). However, different cultural expectations (appropriate ages and institutional and structural constraints (for example, local housing markets or the amount and prerequisites of government housing and income support) contexts may shape the interpretations of independence and the significance of the different dimensions. Two indicative examples can be drawn from England: first, higher proportions of young people leave home to undertake tertiary study (see Burke, Pinkey & Ewing 2002, p.5); second, as a result of the single-room rent, share households have often been associated with poverty and reliance upon a stingy welfare state (Heath 1999). The significance and role of education in young people's life plans, and pre-existing perceptions, will shape the value and significance placed on shared housing, and the dimensions of independence claimed within it.

Keeping in mind these caveats, it can be argued that acknowledging both the symbolic and the practical elements of independence encourages a re-focus on the relationships that give substance and meaning to independence in the context of share households. Many sociologists have focused on individualism that is expressed in young people's accounts of their interests, choices and responsibilities. Some researchers are now calling for a reminder of the ongoing significance of our connections and negotiations with others; this study highlights the usefulness of such reconsideration. Share householders' descriptions of independence incorporate individualism through their emphasis on their freedom to pursue their own concerns and their responsibility for themselves. But relationships continue to be relevant, even

though this sentiment is not explicitly stated by the participants. While the young people in this study may not emphasise their ongoing connections to their parents, it is clear that these connections facilitate the claims of independence in very material ways. If we are to fully understand the dimensions and significance of independence within this context, we need to consider how subjective dimensions are underpinned by the resources transferred through ongoing relationships.

It is possible to read group living and reliance on parental income as an incomplete and imperfect movement toward adulthood, a signifier of the barriers that are shaped by government ideologies and practices and a limiting economic sphere. However, in doing so we would fail to acknowledge the worldview of young people. For example, in the current context, we see young people investing symbolic significance in what might otherwise be argued to be relatively trivial activities: socialising how and when they want to, and taking responsibility for mundane householding activities such as paying the bills. The significance of these activities lasts even when the young people move back (temporarily) into their parents' homes – when their independence would seem most obviously absent. Analysis of subjects' interpretations of their social and economic position provides an alternative and somewhat more empowering perspective on the challenges faced by young people today.

References

- Ahier, J. & Moore, R. 1999, 'Post-16 education, semi-dependent youth and the privatisation of inter-age transfers: re-theorising youth transition', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, v.20, n.4, pp.515-30.
- Arnett, J. 1997, 'Young people's conceptions of the transition to adulthood', *Youth and Society*, v.29, n.1, pp.3-23.
- Burke, T., Pinkey, S. & Ewing, S. 2002, *Rent assistance and young people's decision making*, Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Melbourne.
- Coles, B. 1995, *Youth and social policy*, University College London Press, London.
- Furlong, A. & Cartmel, F. 1997, *Young people and social change: Individualization and risk in later modernity*, Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Goldscheider, F., Thornton, A. & Young-DeMarco, L. 1993, 'A portrait of the nest-leaving process in early adulthood', *Demography*, v.30, n.4, pp.683-99.

AUTHOR

Kristin Natalier is a lecturer in Sociology in the School of Sociology and Social Work at the University of Tasmania. Her research focus lies in the areas of youth, law and changing family forms. She is particularly interested in the commonalities and disjunctions between policy and 'expert' definitions of social issues, and individuals' own interpretations of the challenges and opportunities they face.

- Greene, A.L. & Wheatley, S.M. 1992, 'I've got a lot to do and I don't think I'll have the time: Gender differences in late adolescent's narratives of the future', *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*, v.21, n.6, pp.667-86.
- Hartley, R. 1992, 'Adult in the eyes of the state', *Family Matters*, v.27, August.
- Hartley, R. & Woolcott, I. 1994, 'Young people and families', *Family Matters*, v.38, pp.12-14.
- Heath, S. 1999, 'Young adults and household formation in the 1990s', *British Journal of Sociology of Education*, v.20, n.4, pp.545-61.
- Heath, S. & Kenyon, E. 2001a, 'Young adults and shared household living: Achieving independence through the (re)negotiation of peer relationships', in *Youth, citizenship and empowerment*, eds H. Helve & C. Wallace, Ashgate, Aldershot, pp.110-28.
- 2001b, 'Single young professionals and shared household living', *Journal of Youth Studies*, v.4, n.11, pp.83-100.
- Jones, G. 2004, 'A risky business experiences of leaving home among young rural women', *Journal of Youth Studies*, v.7, n.2, pp.209-20.
- 1995, *Leaving home*, Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Lahelma, E. & Gordon, T. 2003, 'Home as a physical, social and mental space: Young people's reflections on leaving home', *Journal of Youth Studies*, v.6, n.4, pp.377-90.
- Mason, J. 2004, 'Personal narratives, relational selves: residential histories in the living and telling', *The Sociological Review*, v.52, n.2, pp.162-79.
- Mitchell, D. & Evans, A. 2003, 'Understanding the "multi-generation squeeze": The impact of delayed transitions to independence of young adults', paper presented at 4th International Research Conference on Social Security, Antwerp, 5-7 May.
- Natalier, K. 2003, "'I'm not his wife": Doing gender and doing housework in the absence of women', *Journal of Sociology*, v.39, n.3, pp.253-69.
- 2004, 'Avoiding the housework: Domestic labour and gender in group living contexts', *Electronic Journal of Sociology* <<http://www.sociology.org>>.
- Thomson, R., Hollan, J., McGrellis, S., Bell, R., Henderson, S. & Sharpe, S. 2004, 'Inventing adulthoods: A biographical approach to understanding youth citizenship', *The Sociological Review*, v.52, n.2, pp.218-39.
- Westberg, A. 2004, 'Forever young? Young people's conception of adulthood: The Swedish case', *Journal of Youth Studies*, v.7, n.1, pp.35-53.
- Wyn, J. & White, R. 1997, *Rethinking Youth*, Allen and Unwin, St Leonards.

GET RELEVANT YOUTH NEWS DELIVERED MONTHLY TO YOUR INBOX FOR FREE!

➤ Youth Field Xpress

Youth Field Xpress is a free and useful collection of the latest youth news emailed monthly to thousands of readers in Australia and overseas. It also includes reviews of new resources and address changes for the major services in the youth field.

To subscribe send an email to: yfx-on@mail-list.com – and confirm your subscription by replying to the email we send you in return.

Email submissions for YFX no later than the 10th of each month to: Anne Hugo (editor); information@acys.utas.edu.au

or information@acys.utas.edu.au (See our criteria for inclusion on the ACYS website at: www.acys.utas.edu.au/yfx/)

"...incredibly useful. There is rarely a month when I don't follow up something from it. Thanks!"

WRITER FOR A MAJOR AUSTRALIAN MAGAZINE, VIC